What does the COVID-19 response mean for global data justice?

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Published in:
Data justice and COVID-19

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

GLOBAL DATA JUSTICE?

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This book is a product of an exceptional moment in the evolving relations between technology, power, and justice. In early 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world and states of emergency were declared by one country after another, the global technology sector—already equipped with unprecedented wealth, power, and influence—mobilised to seize the opportunity. This collection is an account of what happened next. The story these essays tell took place in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, capturing the emergent conflicts and responses around the world. The essays also provide a global perspective on the implications of these conflicts and responses for justice: they make it possible to compare how the intersection of

 state and corporate power—and the way that power is targeted and exercised—confronts, and invites resistance from, civil society in countries worldwide.

The collection consists of two main sections: commentaries and dispatches. We first invited authors from different countries, cross-border communities, regions, and sectors to write dispatches, which provide a point-in-time and local reflection on the role that data, technology, and industry are playing in the COVID-19 response. The dispatches come from every continent with confirmed cases of the virus, to permit a comparative analysis. We then made the dispatches available to a second group of authors who commented on emergent themes. We present these thematic commentaries first.

The global spread of countries included here reflects the unfolding of the first wave of the pandemic and must be understood in that context. For instance, it does not consider the connections between pandemic responses, data, and the Black Lives Matter protests, which unfolded as a result of this first wave. We should expect these connections to become the focus of scholarship by data justice researchers around the world in the coming months.

We initiated this collection, in part, because the pandemic has amplified a nascent *epidemiological turn in digital surveillance*. We have observed at least two dimensions to this turn: function creep and market-making. In the first, governments and technology vendors have pushed the repurposing of existing systems to track, predict, and influence. Much of this builds on techniques previously developed by mobile network operators for epidemiological surveillance in low and middle-income countries over the last decades. These efforts have previously been pursued in the name of both development[1] and humanitarian aid,[2] and are now being repackaged into proposals for the COVID-19 response.[3]

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In the second dimension, software developers around the world have launched mobile apps to support contact tracing. Given that it appears that, at least in some cases, developers stand to benefit commercially from the use of these apps,[4] we also believe it is worth exploring the linkages between digital contact tracing and surveillance capitalism—the process of extracting value from data created as a byproduct of people's use of digital technologies.

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Many contributors to this volume are academics, though we have also included

 civil society experts and journalists from around the world with a critical eye for the sociopolitical implications of technological and data-driven innovation. They have different and often contrasting views on how the use of data technology is being (or how it should be) pursued under the conditions of a global pandemic. Our contributors also bring with them different understandings of justice. As editors, we did not aim for consensus. This is the assumption at the centre of our work on global data justice: people perceive similar technologies and interventions differently depending on their standpoint, and we need to compare and contextualise their views to understand what common ideas of just data governance exist.

The questions we asked our contributors as a starting point for their essays were the following: What effects is the current global state of emergency having on the relationship between technology and authority? Are we seeing new trends? A different scale or acceleration of existing trends? What is the effect of the intensity of global attention to the emergency? Who are the points of articulation or facilitating actors for these developments? And who are the winners and losers in these changes?

The first-wave countries have demonstrated how politics and epidemiology intersect with pandemic technology development and data collection. Brazil, the US, and the UK, along with many lower-income countries, have all shown how the pandemic heavily penalises poverty, marginalisation, and invisibility, and that technology does not solve any of these in the absence of broader moves to provide justice. Developments in the UK are mentioned in several essays, likely owing to the fact that it is one of the jurisdictions in the English-speaking world where a contact-tracing app is being developed, spatial distancing guidelines have been resisted and debated in the public eye, and there has been an absence of pledges to resource an under-funded public healthcare system—a gap technology firms have eagerly offered their services to fill.

Our intended audience is diverse. This book can be read as a guide to the landscape of pandemic technology, but it can also be used to compare and contrast individual country strategies. We hope that it will prove useful as a tool for teaching and learning in various academic and applied disciplines, but also as a reference point for activists and analysts interested in issues of data governance, including data protection in emergencies, function creep, techno-solutionism,

technology theatre (i.e. focusing public attention on elaborate, ineffective procedures to mask the absence of a solution to a complex problem),[5] crisis entrepreneurialism, public–private partnerships, and questions of what constitutes legitimate intervention.

At first sight this collection might look as if it is making a case for technological exceptionalism—the idea that technology, and now data technologies in particular, occupy a unique position in society and that we should analyse their contributions and problems as a category of their own. Instead, the essays that follow demonstrate that data technologies both reflect and construct justice and injustice in ways that can be understood through analytical lenses we already possess. The pandemic has amplified many existing problems of technology and justice—including techno-solutionism; the frequent thinness of the legitimacy of technological intervention; excessive public attention on elaborate yet ineffective procedures in the absence of a nuanced political response; and the (re)production of power and information asymmetries through new applications of technology.

The questions raised by the following essays tackle these problems by interrogating both COVID-19 technologies and the political,

legal, and regulatory structures that determine how they are applied. The essays suggest that multiple factors influence how these technologies are experienced. Accountability, solidarity, rhetorics of collectivism, the need to signal belonging, and perhaps most importantly, perceptions of individual risk and potential advantage all play a role in how people respond to the request (or demand) that they engage with a particular application or intervention.

In particular, our contributors examine and test the link between the state of emergency and the use of power: Does the application of new monitoring and analytic technologies change relations of power between authorities and people, or merely amplify existing relations? What inequalities does the application of new, or repurposed technologies, make visible? And what responses do we see in terms of solidarity, cooperation or resistance? The way technology is being used in response to the pandemic reveals the relationship between authorities and citizen, how the public good is conceptualised in times of crisis, and how much accountability exists for the powerful. This book exposes the workings of state technological power to critical assessment—and, we hope, contestation.

Acknowledgements

This book was created rapidly in a moment of extraordinary disruption and anxiety worldwide. We would like to thank the contributors for their commitment to the project and for working under extraordinary time constraints, as well as the publisher and designers for putting the book together much faster than would normally be possible. We also want to acknowledge the many voices that are missing from this collection, including the many possible contributions that the pressures of the pandemic prevented from materialising. For this reason, we aim to keep expanding the collection through the Global Data Justice project[6].

References

1. Taylor, L. (2016) "The ethics of big data as a public good: which public? Whose good?" *Phil. Trans. R. Soc.* A.37420160126.

2. Including, for example, the Data for Refugees initiative: https://d4r.turktelekom.com.tr

3. See, for example: Oliver et al. (2020) Mobile phone data for informing public health actions across the COVID-19 pandemic life cycle. Science Advances 6(23).

4. See: https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-google-and-apple-stores-had-a-covid-19-app-with-ads-11591365499

5. See McDonald's commentary in the next chapter.

6. See: https://globaldatajustice.org

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The Global Data Justice team worked on this project with funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement n° 757247).